An In-Depth History of the Development of Table Mountain

by James W. Young

Introduction

"Table Mountain? I've heard of that. Isn't that somewhere in South Africa?" Yes indeed, but not this one! There are a gazillion 'Table Mountains' around the globe, a term used to describe a flat top mountain just about anywhere. The most famous one is probably the one found in Cape Town, South Africa, but there are others that are much less obvious. Among these, there are a number of such named mountains in Washington and California, and in particular, this one in southern California about which this history focuses on.

Table Mountain (TM) lies on the northeastern slopes of the San Gabriel Mountain range, only 41 airline miles due northeast of downtown Los Angeles. TM is the highest point and the beginning of a downward slanting ridge that extends 4 miles to the east-south-east. This ridge is the northern boundary of the Swarthout Valley, which contains the small mountain community of Wrightwood. Swarthout Valley has a slightly higher southern boundary named Blue Ridge, with the two ridges approximately one mile apart. These two ridges come closest together three miles west of Wrightwood at a place named 'Big Pines' (not the same as 'Big Pine' in the Owens valley, some 200 miles north), at an elevation of 6852 feet. California Highway 2 (The Angeles Crest Highway) runs east to west through Swarthout Valley, through Wrightwood, and cuts between the two ridges at Big Pines. This road continues west through the San Gabriels exiting the mountains some 60 miles later in the La Canada/Flintridge communities near the Verdugo Mountains. Although getting to TM from the greater Los Angeles area can be made by a multitude of different 'road' ways, somewhere along the line you will access Highway 2, if not for only a short distance. The average of these various distances is around 80 miles.

TM's elevation is 7516 feet above sea level, with a secondary peak (named Mount Peltier) having an elevation of 7473 feet, just over a mile to the east. Blue Ridge's elevation ranges from around 7800 feet near Big Pines to over 8500 feet (Wright Mountain) about 4 miles to the south-east of TM. At Big Pines, the 'Table Mountain Road' extends 1 ¼ miles to the top of TM. This road curves past the old Big Pines Ski Clubhouse, through McClellan Flats, past the Table Mountain ski/play area, and ending at Jet Propulsion Laboratory's "Table Mountain Facility".

This historical study will include the roads, communities, and reasons for the development of Table Mountain for the purpose of scientific studies of the sun, solar system, and earth's atmosphere since the mid-1920's. Names of important people associated with all aspects of Table Mountain's history, along with extensive photographic records of each step to the present twenty-first century use will be developed as an on-going project from the author.

Preface

In researching the history of just about anything, there are seldom enough answers for all the questions one puzzles over. Rather than avoid all the unanswered questions, I will pose some upfront to you readers. Who first named this mountain? Who were the first to stand on its summit? Several years ago, I posed the following scenario to those who would listen; "I'll bet someone climbed to the top of (this) Table Mountain with a picnic lunch in an old wicker basket, sat down amongst the trees, ate their sandwiches and admired the sprawling desert view below them!" Although I have never done exactly that, I have gazed out across the broad Mojave Desert north to Mt. Whitney (160 miles), northeast to Charleston Peak in Nevada (170 miles), and southeast to Mt. San Jacinto (70 miles) for the last 46 years. It had to be quite a sight to the early Serrano Indians/explorers, and potential picnickers from the early days of Los Angeles. Then I found this picture, much to my surprise and amazement!

This image was taken of some Smithsonian people that first came to Table Mountain in the early 1920's. The gentleman on the right is Dr. Charles Greeley Abbot, who came to TM in hopes of locating a better 'field test station' for the Smithsonian Institute. Someone at Mt. Wilson Observatory (some 25 miles to the southwest) suggested during one of Abbot's early visits to that facility, that, "….Table Mountain was 2000 feet higher, and much drier."

That alone brings up some of the other unanswered questions I have been seeking answers for, and yet uncovered. Who told Abbot about TM? Someone had to have access to a very current (1920's) USGS survey map with names and elevations on it. And where did they come to know TM had a much drier climate. With these additional questions I am still in pursuit of more documents, pictures and facts. Have some answers? Write me at TMO.